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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of the modified register, here termed Foreigner Register, the register of language that is used by language teachers with students of perceived low language proficiency, is discussed. As used by language teachers, Foreigner Register is well formed and simplified or modified in terms of syntax, phonology, and lexis. The characteristics of Foreigner Talk and Foreigner Register as described in six studies are discussed. Generalizations regarding the apparent functions of Foreigner Register in the language class and the possible implications of its use for the language learner are highlighted. It is asserted that Foreigner Register should be supported for use in the language classroom since it facilitates communication and language acquisition. However, it must not be used to the exclusion of other forms since it acts as a comprehension inhibitor by not helping the student to learn to function in an environment of unmodified language. (RW)

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FOREIGNER REGISTER: CHARACTERISTICS AND IMPLICATIONS

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Research has demonstrated that native speakers adjust and modify their speech in attempting to communicate with individuals of perceived low language proficiency, such as children, foreigners, and language students. This modified speech includes various kinds of predictable simplification and suprasegmental modifications. Of particular interest are modifications made by language teachers with their students. Does the use of varying degrees of foreigner register by teachers do more to help or hinder learners? What is the responsibility of the teacher to provide learners with unmodified input? Until research provides us with answers to these and other questions, teachers need to become fully aware of the many adjustments they make, often unconsciously, in the language they use with their students.

It is a widely decumented phenomenon that native speakers adjust and modify their speech when interacting with individuals of perceived low language proficiency, such as children, foreigners, and language students. Some studies of the register used by native speakers with nonnative speakers have identified a

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simplified language system that includes a variety of non-standard features. Ferguson (1975) has labeled this system Foreigner Talk.

Other studies, particularly those with language teachers as subjects, have generally found few nonstandard features in the language used by native speakers with non-native speakers. Henzl (1973) uses the term Foreign Language Classroom Register to distinguish this variety of language, which is generally well-formed, from Ferguson's Foreigner Talk. In this paper this distinction will be maintained. The term Foreigner Register will be used to describe that register of language used by native speakers with non-native speakers which is well-formed and simplified or modified in terms of syntax, phonology, and lexis. Foreigner Talk will refer to a simplified code that contains predictable nonstandard features.

This paper is designed primarily to increase awareness of Foreigner Register, the register of language that is used by language teachers with their students. First the characteristics of both Foreigner Talk and Foreigner Register as described in six important studies will be discussed and suggestions made as to who the most adept users of these registers might be. Next some generalizations will be suggested as to the apparent function of Foreigner Register in the language class, and observations made about the possible implications of it for the language learner. The paper will conclude with some comments, questions, and suggestions for further research.

CHARACTERISTICS OF FOREIGNER TALK AND FOREIGNER REGISTER

One of the first studies to examine the phenomenon of the modified register used by native speakers with non-native speakers was that done by Charles Ferguson, who collected his data from a sociolinguistics class at Stanford (Ferguson 1975). Students were asked to describe what they might say to a foreigner in a given situation. This was not to be real interaction; students were merely to imagine situations and respond as realistically as they could. A variety of standard and nonstandard features was found in the students' responses. They reported that their speech would be louder, slower, their stress, pronunciation, and intonation more exaggerated, and that they would make more pauses than in normal speech to other native speakers. Nonstandard grammatical changes included numerous omissions, such as the, be, and inflectional suffixes (case, person tense, number), as well as nonstandard negative formation (no + v).

In another study (Hatch, Shapira, and Gough 1978), three kinds of interactions between native and non-native speakers were examined. In the first, a native speaker (Rina) adjusted

to and copied the speech patterns of a non-native speaker (Zoila). There were many examples of pronoun (it) deletion in Rina's speech, some copula and aux (do) deletion, and extensive use of verbs that were uninflected for tense. Nonstandard negatives were also common. The second interaction studied was of an adult school teacher, George, who used nonstandard modifications extensively with his students both in and out of class. Only when actual teaching (e.g., controlled exercises) was taking place were nonstandard grammatical features absent from George's speech. Similar adjustments to those made by Rina were recorded, including many uninverted questions and omitted articles. In the third interaction, non-native speakers made phone calls to service personnel (airlines, restaurants, typists), and nonstandard modifications in the speech of the native speakers were not noted. There was, however, extensive adjustment of their speech as they attempted to communicate information to the non-native speakers. Repetition, restatement, and increased redundancy were common. The pace of speech was slower, there were more pauses, and special stress was noted on key words. There was some elimination of contractions and many instances of confirmation checking devices which seemed to be more common than simplification of syntax.

A study by Arthur, et al. (1980) also utilized the format of a phone call from non-native speakers to airline service personnel. The native speakers responses to the non-native speakers consisted of generally shorter utterances than those given to native speakers. The grammar was simpler than that used with native speaker callers, and significantly fewer bits of information were given. There were fewer false starts and vocalized pauses, more silent pauses, and the tempo was somewhat slower.

Long (1980) studied native speaker-native speaker (NS-NS) and native speaker-non-native speaker (NS-NNS) interactions under a controlled situation. NS-NS and NS-NNS dyads were formed, and timed tasks were assigned, recorded and transcribed. Among the significant results, more present marking of verbs in the speech of NSs to NNSs was observed, as was a greater number of questions than statements. Other features of NS input to the NNS were characterized by more comprehension checks, clarification requests, repetitions, and expansions.

The last two studies in this brief overview concern the register of foreign language instruction. In a study conducted by Gaies (1976) the syntactic features of the speech of eight ESL teacher trainees (three of whom were non-native speakers) were examined. Tape recordings of the trainees' classes were made three times during a ten-week period and portions transcribed. These were compared with transcriptions of recordings made at weekly meetings with their peers and instructors. The transcribed speech samples were divided into T-units (one main clause plus any embedded clauses or phrases, as defined by

Hunt, 1970). The T-units were then analyzed for length, ratio of main and subordinate clauses, length of clauses, and number of adjective, adverbial, and noun clauses per 100 T-units. As measured by these variables, the speech that the ESL teacher trainees used in their classrooms was characterized by an overall syntactic simplification that was not evident in their speech with their peers and professors. Furthermore, all variables increased or decreased in complexity according to the level of proficiency of the ESL students. Gaies finds that these kinds of adjustments are typical of those that NSs make for any adult learning a second language and believes that there is no reason to assume that classroom language is a unique register (Gaies 1976, p. 13).

Henzl (1973, 1979) conducted two studies in which native speakers of Czech addressed various groups and proficiency levels of American students of the Czech language. Transcriptions of tapes of NSs (Czech) addressing NNSs (Americans) were compared with transcriptions of the same NS Czechs addressing other Czechs. The content was the same in both cases. The most radical adjustments by NSs were made with the low-level competency students; there were progressively fewer modifications as the proficiency level of the listeners increased. Henzl observed similar changes in Czech to those that have been found in English Foreigner Register. There were overall lexical and syntactic simplifications, few compounds and idiomatic phrases, and many situational links to concrete factors, particularly in the speech addressed to low-level students. Sentences were manipulated to keep them short, simple, and well-formed. There were fewer subordinate clauses and fewer markings for tense and case. The speech was louder, slower, and more clearly articulated than that to native speakers of Czech. Pauses occurred at constituent boundaries more frequently than is normal for NS-NS speech, in which pauses are less regular. There were very few hesitations and slips of the tongue, and more explanatory gestures and facial expressions. All speech analyzed was acceptable to native speakers; i.e., no non-standard modifications were noted.

All native speakers, including children, appear to be able to modify their speech when they interact with someone whom they perceive as having low language proficiency. Furthermore, we tend to slip into this simplified register automatically and not to be fully aware of all the changes we make to accommodate and assist the listener. Some people may be more adept users of Foreigner Register and Foreigner Talk than others. Hatch, et al., (1978) noted that both Rina and George had had extensive contact with NNSs. In my own work I have noticed that experienced ESL teachers appear to be able to adjust to numerous levels of Foreigner Register with much more ease and fluency than ESL teacher trainees with little experience or contact with foreigners. This observation needs to be verified,

however. It may be the case that speakers who simplify the most are the best language learners themselves (they are, in a sense, copying or learning from the NNS). It has also been suggested that they are more empathetic and sensitive to second language learners (Hatch, et al., 1978, p. 58).

FUNCTIONS OF FOREIGNER REGISTER

Similarities have been found in speech addressed to foreigners and speech addressed to children (motherese or caretaker speech) in terms of surface structure. However, significant differences apparently exist in the functions of those structures. Freed (1980) found that the function of motherese was primarily to shape the child's activities. Foreigner Register, on the other hand, appears to function as a means of facilitating the exchange of information, or of "lightening the NNSs interactional burden" (Long 1980, p. 135).

Long (1980) also noted that adjustments in the speech of NSs may be motivated more by a need to communicate than by a conscious desire to teach the language (p. 60). However, in an actual foreign language classroom situation, the two purposes are no doubt interrelated. That is, Foreigner Register probably plays the dual role of communication facilitator and language teaching device. Henzl (1973) comments that NS teachers in a foreign language classroom situation make "linguistic choices in accordance to their judgement of what is easy, simple, and clear for the listener to hear, perceive, and comprehend" (p. 218). It has been suggested that this kind of simplified code is somehow linked to language acquisition (Gaies 1976, Hatch 1978, Krashen 1980, Hatch and Long 1980). This relationship between acquisition and simplified input needs further study, and future developments in this area should be of great interest to language teachers.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE LANGUAGE LEARNER

Many adult language learners in this country are in a formal classroom for a limited amount of time. They then move on to American universities, return to their countries to work in a field that requires English proficiency, or move into the American work force and society. The college- and profession bound students are in a particularly difficult position, in that they are pressed for time. We frequently see students who need to learn English in six months or less in order to enter a degree program in an American university by a specific date. I often have the uncomfortable sensation that these students are not really ready to compete with Americans at the university level or to work with Americans in international businesses.

Many of us realize that even some of our best advanced level students have communication and comprehension problems outside, but not inside, the language class. Perhaps this is because outside the class learners are grappling with unmodified input rather than classroom language. Yet students who attend American universities will be faced with this from all sides in the form of lectures, discussions, readings, written and oral directions, and so on. The ability to comprehend unmodified input is equally important in the world of business.

Many of us simulate academic and professional activities in the classroom, especially in our advanced classes. However, we are probably unaware of the extent to which we as teachers utilize Foreigner Register even at the advanced level. Our conversation seems natural, the strain of searching for synonyms and of adjusting our syntax is gone, and our classroom activities are as realistic as possible. But ESL teachers are the Foreigner Register experts -- we are fluent, comfortable, natural with it, especially with our advanced students. Most advanced level teachers that I have questioned are not aware of many changes they make in their speech, and profess to be using completely "natural" language. It is completely natural, perhaps, but it is not completely unmodified. This theory has not been fully documented and needs further investigation. But if we take a look at some of the characteristics of unmodified speech, we will begin to see the differences.

One of the most obvious differences between modified speech and that which is unmodified is in the area of fluency. If we consider the extent to which nonfluencies exist in unmodified speech, we will realize just how unnaturally fluent we are in our language classroom settings. False starts, pauses and hesitations, incomplete sentences, incomplete expressions of thoughts, stutterings and stammering, mumbling, trailing off -- all are typical, to a greater or lesser degree, of normal speech. And how many of us are aware of the extent to which our speech both in and out of the class contains reductions and assimilations? Many of us who articulate the differences between What are you...? What do you...? What have you...? inside the classroom may quite unconsciously reduce all three to Whaddaya...? in conversation with our peers and not even sound excessively informal. Finally, unmodified speech is further complicated by characteristics we often notice in lectures and meetings, namely garbled ideas, lack of organization, digressions and ramblings, humor, references that are unknown to NNSs, proverbs, sayings, cliches, idioms that were not in the book, and so forth.

There are undoubtedly many more features of unmodified input that are different from the register of language that we use in the language classroom. The ones mentioned above will serve to give us an idea of the kinds of problems we

face in preparing our students to deal with unmodified language use once they have left the security of the language class.

CONCLUSION: WHAT DO DO?

I have no answers at this point as to what we should do to further accommodate the advantages and diminish the disadvantages of the use of Foreigner Register in the second language classroom. I have many questions, some ideas, and just a few suggestions. Answers may appear eventually as researchers pool their findings and work together with teachers and materials developers.

First we must speak in support of the use of Foreigner Register in the language classroom, simply because we do not seem to be able to get along without it for communicating purposes. If it is also found that this kind of modified language facilitates language acquisition, then the argument in support of the use of Foreigner Register as a necessary language teaching device becomes even stronger.

In the same breath we must speak against the sole use of Foreigner Register in the classroom if, in fact, it acts as a comprehension inhibitor by not helping our students learn to function in an environment of unmodified language. Are we as teachers responsible for providing our students with training in unmodified language? If we decide, as most of us probably have, that exposure to unmodified language should be a part of our students' language learning experience, at which point(s) in the learning process, in which form(s) and how, do we present it? Perhaps the most difficult area of development will be at the beginning and intermediate levels, where Foreigner Register is such an integral part of the language classroom experience. We might expect to see more experimentation with contact assignments at these levels. We should also expect to see more models for unmodified language components at all levels of our intensive courses, such as those developed by Pearson (1981) and Vandrick (1981) for the advanced level. Both of these models are built around a core of NS guest speakers from outside the classroom and outside the language teaching profession.

But before we adopt hasty solutions to this problem, we must ask and attempt to answer many more questions about the forms and functions of Foreigner Register in general and its place in the language classroom in particular. Most importantly, is it an integral element for comprehension and therefore essential for language acquisition?

In order to answer this and other questions, it is crucial that we develop a highly sensitized awareness of the characteristics of our in-class and out-of-class speech and the nonverbal

features of both. An awareness of the kind of input our students are getting from us will help us focus our attention on how to provide them with the extra input they may need and are not getting. Foreigner Register is a permanent feature of classroom language. We must learn both to capitalize on its functions as communication and possibly language acquisition facilitator and to work around it in an effort to assist our students in the difficult task of eventually comprehending unmodified language.

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